Mo Yan's *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*: Mother China and the Wheel of Misfortune

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Big Breasts and Wide Hips (1996 in Chinese, Trans. Howard Goldblatt, 2004), a title laden with carnal appeal, procreative amplitude, and mother earth interest, is Mo Yan's longest novel to date, an epic piece spanning the struggle for survival of the woman Shangguan Lu, via her life story and those of her eight unbidden daughters and her one disappointing son. It is a story that does homage to the women of modern China and that bows to the terrible irony of Chinese history, the grist mill of lives, hopes and dreams of so many Chinese people in the last tumultuous century. It is moreover a story built on an essential paradigm and an almost mythic trope: the paradigm is the strife-ridden dialectic of Chinese "progress" from the late feudal society of the last empire to the first Republic, the Japanese invasion of the late 1930s, the drab first generation of the Communist era of the 1950s, the oppressive Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, and finally the post-Maoist corporate culture of the 1980s and beyond;[1] the trope, borrowed from Chinese tradition and reprised in the advent of the infamous "one child policy," is the tragi-comical plight of the family, in this case of the mother, Shangguan Lu, who keeps on bearing daughters in the futile attempt to bring forth the man-child who will secure prosperity and continuation of the family name.[2] However, since Shangguan Lu's husband is impotent, so that all of her nine children are fathered by other men, including a Swedish Catholic priest, she is really a mythic mother figure, a modern Mother China.

The Wheel of Misfortune

Shangguan Lu's first seven daughters are named in order in Chapter One, along with the meanings of their names: "Laidi (Brother Coming), Zhaodi (Brother Hailed), Lingdi (Brother Ushered), Xiangdi (Brother Desired), Pandi (Brother Anticipated), Niandi (Brother Wanted), and Qiudi (Brother Sought)" (17). To these are added Yunü, the eighth girl, and Jintong, the boy, whose names mean "Jade Girl" and "Golden Boy." In Taoist lore, Jade Girl and Golden Boy are the children of the Jade Emperor and servants of the Immortals, hence ideals of childhood, often depicted in Chinese art and associated with the New Year celebration. They are the perfect children, and their names connote auspicious family destiny, happiness, and prosperity. But the history of the children of Shangguan Lu is the very antipodes of the auspicious; it is the history of fantastic and unimaginable disaster in a plethora of forms, a pandemic

of misfortune and death that will claim all eight of her daughters while Shangguan Lu toils on, raising her orphaned grandchildren and enduring the stigma of association with counterrevolutionary elements and her own procreative past. The novel is both a great symphony of death and an epic threnody of heroic persistence in the face of Chinese history in the 20th century, a Wheel of Misfortune from which all fall but none rise.

Mo Yan's Wheel of Misfortune has little to do with the character or psychology of Mother Lu's daughters, who fall in a variety of ways not according to their personal attributes but in relation to events in Chinese history from 1930 to 1965. However, their misfortunes are oddly entwined. Laidi, 1st daughter, loves Sha Yueliang, the guerrilla fighter she met in the marshes during the Japanese attack on Dalan village in 1939; but he soon turns to the Japanese, as did a parcel of young Chinese, and is rightly stigmatized as a traitor, feared and hated by the villagers. Laidi runs with him for a while and bears a child by him but then returns to Dalan village where she is forced to marry the crippled mute Speechless Sun, widower of 3rd sister Lingdi. Speechless Sun is a loyal Communist soldier, hence village hero, but he is also a vulgar, legless, malodorous, disgusting halfwit who can only utter one word: "Strip!" Laidi rebels by carrying on an affair with Birdman Han, Lingdi's lost lover, and eventually murders her ridiculous, foul and abusive husband, for which crime she is imprisoned and executed.

Zhaodi, 2nd daughter of Lu, is more fortunate in the short term, as she marries the enterprising landlord Sima Ku and becomes the first lady of Dalan; but so doing, she binds herself to the feudal order that will be persecuted by the Communist movement in its ascendency. Zhaodi is killed in the civil war, and Sima Ku, once a heroic defender of the village, becomes an infamous fugitive outlaw; he is finally executed by Lu Liren, Communist officer and husband of yet another Shangguan daughter, 5th daughter Pandi. Pandi is perhaps the most progressive and heartless of Lu's children. She casts her lot with Lu Liren, changes her name to Ma Ruilian, and for a time they attain regional status as Communist leaders. But they too are struck down, Lu Liren by a heart attack during the great flood (late 1950s) that raises the Flood Dragon River and inundates the region, and Pandi of starvation and disease shortly after. Pandi's corpse is so heavy, swollen with her crimes of greed, cruelty, and pride, that it takes a veritable platoon of carriers to tote her back to Mother Lu in Dalan village.

Lingdi, Lu's 3rd daughter, is the first unwilling bride of the local hero and drunken brute Speechless Sun. Lingdi is distinguished as the child who attempts to escape from the vortex of calamity, the terrible Wheel of Misfortune, via creative madness or magical dementia. Lingdi falls in love with Birdman Han, an itinerant bird-catcher who provides her family with wild fowl during a season of dearth. Birdman Han disappears, though, and Lingdi in her despair becomes a Bird Fairy, adopting the appearance and behavior of a fantastic bird to fly away from Speechless Sun. She dies by "flying" from a cliff behind an American Army pilot, Lieutenant Babbit, who is testing a glider he built as an experiment.[3] Niandi, 6th unwanted daughter of Mother Lu, marries the American Babbit, a "quiet American" who is in China to assist the Nationalist forces. But the Nationalists are soon to be a lost cause, and Niandi and Babbit are killed in the explosion of a munitions dump in a cave during the civil war.

The other three daughters never marry. However, they suffer as casualties of equally morbid disposition. Xiangdi, 4th daughter, sells herself into prostitution as a young girl to provide unwitting Mother Lu with a one-time sum of food money. She returns to her mother decades later (1961), her mind and body consumed by syphilis, to die five years thereafter in Shangguan Lu's arms. Qiudi, 7th daughter, is sold as a small child to a Russian lady from northern China. Adopted by a generous and cultured

Russian family, she becomes a doctor in Russia; but like Xiangdi she finds her way back to Northeast Gaomi and Mother Lu as Qiao Qisha, only to die of starvation in the famine that claimed sister Pandi. At last, Yunü, 8th daughter and twin of the celebrated brother Jintong, born blind on the day of the Japanese incursion, becomes Lu's most cherished and most innocent child. Sadly, she decides to run away at the age of 20, mistakenly believing that she is too great a burden to her poor mother. What becomes of Yunü, we never know.

Jintong the Mammorius

The latter three chapters of the novel (V-VI-VII) relate the grotesque life of Shangguan Jintong, the presumptive Golden Boy of Shangguan Lu's life. Jintong survives almost literally by hanging on to every tit he can find. Only at the age of 6 is he weaned from his mother's breast by an exasperated Laidi who forces him to drink goat's milk instead; even so, he periodically relapses to his mother's milk, even in middle school where he is the object of scorn and ridicule as a "mamma's boy." Victimized by village bullies, he has to be defended by his music teacher Ji Qiongzhi, rescued by his niece Sha Zaohua and nephew Sima Liang, and saved from imminent murder in the sorghum fields by Sima Ku, the notorious outlaw. At the age of 12, he is chosen Snow Prince for the regional winter festival, a bizarre event where he, as Snow Prince, is tasked with fondling the breasts of all the prospective mothers of Northeast Gaomi (a county-sized territory), and where disaster strikes when Old Jin, a village nymphomaniac with one, and only one, enormous breast of exceeding warmth, mesmerizes Jintong and breaks the taboo against speaking aloud during the festival, causing panic throughout the realm.

Jintong ricochets down the unforgiving corridors of the "iron house" of modern China like a bullet that cannot find its target but never loses its momentum, driven by the endless force of sheer terror.[4] He is somewhat like Voltaire's Candide, careening from one historic minefield to another, but more like Emile Habiby's tragi-comical anti-hero in *Saeed the Pessoptimist* (1974), the impotent and cowardly Palestinian taxi-driver who survives in Israel by serving Israeli intelligence as a (fairly worthless) informant, cravenly avoiding every opportunity to redeem himself by doing something courageous.

In his late teens, Jintong is reunited with his lost 7th sister Qiudi, the Russian-educated doctor now known as Qiao Qisha, at the Flood Dragon River Farm, where both are sent for punishment as "rightists" (supposed Nationalist sympathizers), but he watches during the famine as the gruesome farm cook Pockface Zhang forces Qiudi to submit to anal rape in the woods in exchange for crusts of bread which she chokes down even as she is being raped. The apotheosis of his shame occurs when he himself is accosted at this same labor camp by the female Communist leader there, Commander Long Qingping, a one-armed "fox spirit" who corners Jintong alone at the compound and threatens him with an ultimatum: "There are two paths open to you. You can get it up, or I'll shoot it off!" (424). Commander Long, a terrifying 40 year-old virago, descends upon Jintong in all her horrible nakedness, embellished by her bushy fox tail and her scar-tissued shoulder stump, but finally turns her sidearm in frustration on herself; Jintong, sexualized at last (since he is a virgin too) by this fearful then suicidal apparition, gives her what she wanted even as she dies of her self-inflicted head wound. The psycho-sexual complexities of this union are perhaps beyond any known system of comprehension, but it is clear that no good can possibly come of it. In fact, Jintong confesses the whole ordeal to Qiudi, who records it in her diary; and

even though Commander Long's corpse explodes from bloat during the ensuing flood and cannot be examined, the diary proves sufficient to put Jintong in prison for 15 years (1965-1980) for murder and necrophilia, though he is not guilty of either crime.

Before Jintong is carted off to prison, though, he manages to return home to Mother Lu, who has been taking care of Laidi's orphaned child Parrot Han, nursing the dying Xiangdi, who came home to die bringing precious jewels, the wages of her sad life as a prostitute, hidden in her lute, and providing for Yunü, her blind Jade Girl, 8th daughter. We learn that she and other women working at the local mill have been securing food for their families by eating raw beans and regurgitating them at home for their children. Very soon, the entire Shangguan family is subjected to public humiliation by the Red Guards and made to march in a parade of "Ox Demons and Snake Spirits"; in the course of this mockery, Mother Lu takes pity on a young man who is about to drown in the village pond and is consequently berated, beaten down, and trampled while Jintong stammers in helpless amazement: "'Mother . . . ' He fell to his knees beside his mother, who raised her head with difficulty and glared at him. 'Stand up, my useless son!'" (451).[5] This pathetic scene recalls Jintong's earlier failure to rescue sister Qiudi from rape, but now his cowardice is worse since it is his mother whom he will not try to protect, earning him the lowest of all Chinese epithets, that of "unfilial son."

The Republic of Shame

Fifteen years later, in 1980, Jintong emerges from prison in the far north, where he had herded sheep and performed oral sex under compulsion for a hairy prison guard, into a new and different China. Over is the Cultural Revolution; gone are the Red Guards; and no more is the Dalan Village that he had known. In their place is modern industrial China, a waste land of ill-conceived projects sped forward by avaricious entrepreneurs for whom the only object is money and to whom the past is nothing but a heap of rickety hovels and outmoded rural environs to be bull-dozed, along with their old inhabitants if necessary, and flattened into landfills to accommodate the latest factory, hotel, restaurant, or tourist trap. Lost and fearful of all around him in a bus station, Jintong is astonished to see Parrot Han, Laidi's son by the Birdman, who is the ambitious proprietor of the Eastern Bird Sanctuary, a sort of avian zoo in the new Dalan City with a huge assortment of exotic birds. Parrot Han takes Jintong under his wing (!) and leads him home to see his now ancient, white-haired mother, Shangguan Lu, who has been evicted from the Shangguan compound, now annihilated by Progress, and has taken up residence in the hut near the abandoned pagoda on the outskirts of town. Mother Lu, the living embodiment of Chinese maternal authority, and the pagoda, signifying Taoism and Buddhism, China's ancient traditions of folk wisdom, are thus brought together to be marginalized and destroyed at once by the modern machinery of Capital.

Shangguan Lu's eight daughters have all died, but she perseveres, despite her eviction, in the face of the monstrous and fantastic dissolution of the China she had known, a China fraught with danger, oppression, and natural disasters but for all that more humane than the shameful and disrespectful world of venal capitalism. Mother Lu is still a mother, and she nurses Jintong through a feverish illness and even welcomes Old Jin, the one-breasted goddess of the old Snow Market, to see him—a reunion that results in his total reversion to infantile dependency, as Jintong resorts to her still fulsome bosom and retreats into infancy to escape the noise and furor of the new China. Old Jin, though, has modernized; she is now the queen of trash and

refuse, ruling with an iron hand a large company that recycles plastic and rubber. At length Shangguan Lu intervenes to stop her son's awful regression and offers him an ultimatum, as Commander Long had done. He can have Old Jin as a lover, but not as a nursemaid: "I've been a fool all these years, but I finally understand that it's better to let a child die than let him turn into a worthless creature who can't take his mouth away from a woman's nipple!" (478).

Thus Jintong is thrown into the onrushing river of modern life where predictably, he drowns. First, he is the kept sex toy of Old Jin, until she tosses him out when he fails to engage her drunken husband in a knife fight. Homeless again, he wanders into the clutches of Parrot Han's famously vicious wife Geng Lianlian, who only wants him, bathed and properly attired, to persuade the Mayor of Dalan, his old music teacher and defender Ji Qiongzhi, to provide a huge loan for the enlargement of the Eastern Bird Sanctuary. And when she throws him out, since the loan is not forthcoming, Jintong descends into a dark night of the soul, wandering the back alleys of Dalan until he is mugged and stripped by a gang of thieves and narrowly escapes a pack of wild dogs,[6] only to throw himself desperately through the window of a new department store in pursuit of the breasts of the female mannequins and to discover, to his consternation, that "My god, there's no nipple!" (506).

Three years later and freshly released from the provincial mental hospital, Jintong now in his fifties returns yet again to Dalan just in time to find the authorities on the verge of destroying the old pagoda and his mother's little hut. Indeed, both he and the ancient Shangguan Lu are about to be ground to dust when they are saved by Sima Ku's son Sima Liang—the same who with Sha Zaohua had saved Jintong in the sorghum fields from the bullies who pursued him. Sima Liang, himself a money-drenched and helicoptered capitalist, plucks them from danger and sets Jintong up with a fancy shop, a sort of Chinese Victoria's Secret, which Jintong christens the Unicorn Brassiere Shop. Business goes well until Jintong makes the mistake of allowing himself to be seduced by the daughter of an old family enemy, Wang Yinzhi, who steals the shop from under his nose and, like all the other heartless, aggressive women he has known, kicks him to the curb and has it her own way at his expense.

If, as some observers have suggested, this novel is the story of a modern China where Chinese men have been emasculated, have lost their manhood, or have failed to attain it because they are never even weaned,[7] it is nevertheless the story of the survival of Chinese men and women who continue to persevere as tragi-comic beings in an absurd world, a world in which there cannot be heroic men like Sima Ku or natural women like Shangguan Lu, but only their shadows in vain pursuit of substance, a dream that leads them, like Sha Zaohua and Sima Liang, to leap from their high-rise apartment buildings or to reflect, like Jintong, on the "Listlessness, that great emptiness," that he felt when he "envisioned himself as a withered blade of grass rooted in a barren land, quietly coming to life, quietly growing, and now quietly dying" (464). In the end, Jintong takes his mother to the small church where she had met and loved his actual sire, Swedish Father Malory; there the white petals from a locust tree in blossom fall like blessings all about her; and Jintong meets his hitherto unknown half-brother, the new Pastor Malory. They recognize each other as brothers on sight, and in this happy union of fair-haired bastards there is the consolation that only true kinship can afford in a land where there is only the pretense of legitimacy and the façade of authentic human life.

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Endnotes

1. This paradigm, featuring the various stages of modern Chinese history, is also found in Yu Hua's famous novel *To Live* (1993) and in Lillian Lee's equally well-known tale *Farewell, My Concubine (1993)*, both familiar to the West in translation and in cinematic versions.

2. The trope of the mother who bears numerous daughters while continually hoping for a son was popularized in the widely shown propaganda film *A Sweet Life*, circulated in 1979 in the attempt to persuade such mothers to obey the one child policy. Virtually every Chinese citizen saw this cute film, which ends happily with marriages all around after a good bit of dancing in the woods in slow motion.

3. The motif of the girl who morphs into a bird or butterfly to escape an arranged marriage also occurs in Mo Yan's short story "Soaring" in *Shifu, You'll Do Anything for a Laugh* (2001), where the village girl Yanyan actually turns into a beautiful winged creature and flies to the top of a tree, where she is eventually shot and killed by an arrow from the village headman. Lingdi's metamorphosis, though, is only imaginary.

4. The term "iron house" is one familiar to all who study modern Chinese literature; it is Lu Xun's grim characterization of Chinese society in his story *Diary of a Madman*, in which the madman believes he is trapped in an iron house where people, especially children, are being cannibalized.

5. Here we see not only Jintong's failure as a "useless son" but also his downfall as an impotent and absurd Oedipal pretender who cannot proceed beyond the stage of oral sexuality. These issues are plumbed in David Wang's article "The Literary World of Mo Yan," *WLT* 74, no. 3 (Summer 2000), 487-494.

6. North Gaomi Township is famous in Mo Yan's works, especially in *Red Sorghum*, for its wild dog packs, which originated from the Japanese invasion of 1937, when many villages were annihilated and the liberated village dogs gathered into voracious packs that roamed the region like wolves, preying on every vulnerable person and creature. They are, of course, symbolic of human viciousness high and low.

7. The so-called "rise of the feminine and decline of the masculine" in post-Maoist Chinese culture is a theory around which a scholarly debate has emerged, centered on the gender issues of postmodern Chinese culture. Jintong makes a textbook example of this phenomenon, but I think that Mo Yan parodies the type rather than simply illustrating it. Howard Goldblatt refers to the idea in his preface to the novel: "In a relentlessly unflattering portrait of his male protagonist, Mo Yan draws attention to what he sees as a regression of the human species and a dilution of the Chinese character; in other words, a failed patriarchy" (xi). Yet the women of Jintong's generation are really no better than the men, as evidenced in the conduct of Sha Zaohua the thief, Old Jin the tyrant, Geng Lianlian the miser, Commander Long the sexually frustrated fox spirit, and Ji Qiongzhi and Lu Shengli the cynical politicians—even the eight daughters of Shangguan Lu, who are admirable in various respects, are also flawed and unable to survive. All the truly admirable characters in the novel are those born before the advent of modern China: Sima Ku, Shangguan Lu and her mother-in-law, and Aunty Sun, the village

midwife who birthed Lu's twins and fought the Japanese soldiers who entered the Shangguan compound on that very day. The "regression of the human species" is generic in Mo Yan's works; it is not confined to the masculine, and it is not a mere postcolonial phenomenon.